"painfully slow," adding: "If you want to be discouraged, *this* is the place to settle down."[2]

Another piece of Nixon's "secret plan" was forcing Thieu to accept the same peace deal that Nixon and Kissinger had instructed him *not* to accept from Lyndon Johnson. This Nixon gambit was immediately complicated by the president's decision in January 1969 to admit the Viet Cong to the peace talks in Paris, breaking the promise he'd made to Thieu during the Chennault affair. Now it was the turn of Nixon and Kissinger to be met with the full force of South Vietnamese recalcitrance. After Nixon's election, Thieu proposed sending a group to Paris not to negotiate peace but to make "preliminary contacts." The only major step Thieu took was to appoint Vice President Ky "delegation spokesman"—to remove his most threatening rival from Saigon. Thieu was fearless, for Nixon's conspiracy with Anna Chennault had provided the South Vietnamese president with blackmail material. If Nixon tried to cut and run from Vietnam, he had to worry that Thieu might expose his sabotage of LBJ's peace plan before the Democrats did.[3]

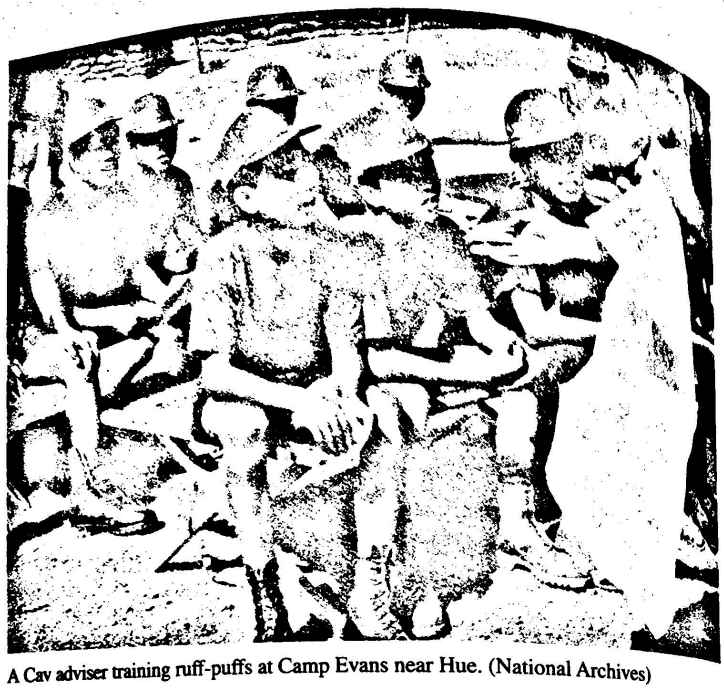
Nevertheless, it was clear that Nixon would get out of Vietnam as quickly as he could. The primary American aim now softened. Instead of destroying the communist armies and forcing negotiations on Hanoi, the aim became preventing the resurgence of the decimated VC, pulling up their political infrastructure, and installing a viable South Vietnamese administration in the beleaguered country's cities and villages. But such a mission, at this stage of the war when American force and patience were running out, seemed as hopeless as search and destroy. Militarily, it was probably not going to work for all of the reasons it had not worked so far, and for a new one: the combat effectiveness of American troops was plummeting as the grunts came to understand that they were pawns in a purposeless war. "President Nixon may claim credit for phasing down the war," Fred Gardner wrote in the *New York Times*. "Congress may debate a timetable for pulling out, but the fact is that rank-and-file GIs are ending the fighting on their own," refusing to fight with the old tenacity, practicing "search and avoid" rather than "search and clear."[4]

In September 1969, US forces captured the notebook of the NVA commander in I Corps. It contained a number of insights, including this: "Peace will be signed by the end of 1969, but our activity will continue until Vietnam is reunified under a communist regime." The "peace with honor" sought by Nixon and Kissinger would be nothing more than a theatrical pause for the thirty-seventh president to wash his hands of a war he had cynically prolonged. The captured NVA notebook, which was copied to CINCPAC and all relevant departments in Washington, made clear that "the enemy was preparing to exploit any peace settlement" to resume the war on *his* terms. The moment the Americans left, the NVA would finish off South Vietnam.[5]

To prepare South Vietnam for that day of reckoning, US advisory groups worked to ready the ARVN for life without the Americans. Unfortunately, the ARVN continued to struggle with basic operations. Their command and supply systems still tethered them to fixed bases, where they were easily avoided by the enemy. ARVN operations still averaged five days—not enough to contact the enemy, let alone defeat him. (American ops lasted thirty days or more in the field.) AWOLs and desertions hollowed out the all-important South Vietnamese maneuver units, and the intelligence gathering of ARVN units was still, as one senior adviser put it, "grossly inadequate." ARVN leadership, despite two decades of combat, remained "woefully inadequate." In combat units, officers down to the battalion level were named by the Joint General Staff in Saigon, and even the worst of them could not be removed by a corps, division, or brigade commander without several months of appeals and paperwork.[6]

The ARVN units hardly fought, preferring static defense of large towns, which they would begrudgingly leave for "walks in the sun" one or two klicks outside of town before hurrying back to the safety of their bunkers. The South Vietnamese Air Force continued to withhold its helicopters from the ARVN, and their strike aircraft continued to fly with little connection to friendly infantry on the ground. They had no radar-equipped aircraft and relied entirely on Americans for their air traffic control, target acquisition, and intelligence. In battle, ARVN infantry still depended on American helicopters for lift, medevacs, and emergency resupply.[7]

The ruff-puffs, critical to pacification because they were the stay-behind units in every village, were another recipient of American largesse. Abrams gave them priority for M-16s over the ARVN. LBJ had already begun an "omnibus action program" to pull the Regional Forces and Popular Forces together and give them a proper "management system." Nixon continued the charade, announcing and meeting "management targets" that had little



A Cav adviser training ruff-puffs at Camp Evans near Hue. (National Archives)

military effect, certainly not enough to justify the soaring cost of the program to American taxpayers. An American adviser who made a surprise visit to a Popular Force outpost in late 1969 found no one patrolling or even ready for action. The abashed militiamen ran off in search of their M-16s and ammo belts, then carefully picked up their steel helmets, which they had laid out to collect rainwater, and poured the contents into a barrel. They had not fired in anger at an enemy in two years.[8]

These ruff-puff reforms were tied to a new Hamlet Evaluation System managed by CORDS. This was just another of the screeching anomalies of Vietnamization. If you were turning the war over to the South Vietnamese, you would think the first thing you would turn over would be village security. But no—it was acknowledged in 1969 that the South Vietnamese government could not be trusted with it. For too many years, Saigon had routinely placed corrupt and abusive colonels in charge of the provinces, and so the Americans found themselves in the absurd position of having to measure and monitor everything at the local level—hamlet rosters, hamlet boundaries, VC activity, ruff-puff efficacy, the number of radios and televisions in every hamlet, school attendance, and whether or not hamlet chiefs actually slept in their hamlets or somewhere else where they (but certainly not their charges) were safe from VC assassins—even as they disengaged.[9]

Bob Komer had left CORDS in 1968, his fiery zeal for the war smothered by the 90,000 pages of hamlet evaluations generated every *month* by his staff. Blowtorch Bob was replaced by forty-eight-year-old William Colby, who had been CIA chief of station in Saigon. Colby took stock of the situation in 1969. After the three communist offensives in 1968, the VC had shifted their attacks to South Vietnam's pacification and Phoenix programs, aiming to weaken and destroy them both with targeted assassinations.

With the VC picking off his officials, Bill Colby decided to pick off theirs. In 1969, the Americans tightened their control of Phoenix, acknowledging that the program—established in 1968 to penetrate and eliminate the VC infrastructure (VCI)—had been too opaque and too readily abused by infighting South Vietnamese officials, who, as one analyst put it, viewed Phoenix "as yet another U.S. requirement that they will fulfill to the minimum degree while availing themselves of the maximum financial benefits of the program."[10]

Yet another opportunity, in short, had been missed. The VCI—crucial, shrouded, and hard to reach—was the linchpin of the war. The term referred to members of the People's Revolutionary Party, who were the true believers controlling the South Vietnamese population through the VC's administrative and military elements. They were hard targets, protected at all times by a squad or platoon of hamlet guerrillas, and they coordinated military operations, propaganda, recruiting, tax collection, communications, security, logistics, liaison, and reconnaissance for the VC and NVA main-force units. The VCI were the eyes, ears, and local muscle of Hanoi inside South Vietnam. They connected the communist armies as well as an estimated 70,000 South Vietnamese citizens actively working for Hanoi. If you penetrated or eliminated the VCI, you would take a long step toward defeating the communist movement in South Vietnam.[11]

Only the South Vietnamese could pull this off, but they shrank from the task. In the first place, digging up the VCI carried the risk of self-incrimination. As a US corps commander in Vietnam noted, "People are reluctant to participate in Phoenix because many members of their

immediate families—sons, daughters, husbands—have worked with the VC. If the program succeeds, many of them will be dead or in jail." Then there was the fear of reprisals. The ceaseless activity of the VC in South Vietnam cowed people into silence. The low quality of South Vietnam's province and district officials—many on their second or third job after being fired from the previous ones for corruption, abuse, or incompetence—added to the difficulties. It took six to eight months to fire even the worst officials. "The problems are recognized, but solutions have not been found," an American adviser wanly explained.

This meant that yet another crucial area that should have been Vietnamized under Saigon's National Police or the ARVN's Military Security Service (MSS) had to be dragged back into CORDS under American control. A reformed Phoenix school at Vung Tau was taught in 1969 by Vietnamese "with U.S. advisers providing the impetus," the spirit of which was summarized by Colonel Werner Michel, MACV's special assistant for VCI intelligence: "Keep pressing! Indoctrinate! Suggest! Help! Keep records of progress!"[12]

Unfortunately, in this field as in so many others, progress was hard to discern. With the drawdown, the US military was shifting back to the advisory model that had prevailed before the introduction of American combat troops in 1965. The advisers in this improvement and modernization program found little of either. American efforts to make the ARVN MSS more daring—more willing to launch "penetration operations" that would put agents at risk but gather critical human intelligence—foundered again on the ARVN's risk-averse nature.

The South Vietnamese preferred to compile "blacklists" of names divulged by defectors or in National Police interrogations, and then kill the people on the lists. They would kill over 26,000 South Vietnamese in the course of the program, many of whom were not actually VC—just a name coughed up during a rough interrogation or in a fit of pique. The killing was done by 4,000 PRUs, described by an American adviser as "extortion and assassination team[s] run directly by the CIA and composed mostly of criminals, deserters, and former Viet Cong." The deliverables of this refashioned Phoenix program were always scanty. No more than 7 percent of VC casualties were caused by Phoenix, and that figure was padded with large numbers of innocents. The Americans wanted the South Vietnamese to kill less and focus more on recruiting agents, penetrating the VCI, and collecting actionable intelligence instead of murdering it.[13]

In this too, the Americans were continually disappointed. In 1969, MACV labeled the ARVN's province-level Phoenix committees "an untouched pool of leads." The VC had five distinct intelligence organizations working at different echelons: hamlet, village, district, province, and central government. They were collecting and countering the Saigon government's intelligence at every turn. And yet try as they might—"Keep pressing! Suggest! Help!"—the Americans could not induce the ARVN Military Security Service to collect intelligence. The operatives considered that far too dangerous. They only did counterintelligence—usually assassinating VC suspects—because that was safer.[14]

No ARVN officer in his right mind wanted to volunteer for a "penetration operation" that might be disclosed to the enemy (by a VC agent inside the MSS) or converted into a PRU "neutralization operation" while the penetrator was still among the soon-to-be-neutralized. And so nothing much happened. The ARVN's Military Security Service refused to coordinate with other government agencies to widen their net, leaving officers and clerks sitting in their offices stacking up index cards with the names and aliases of VCI suspects. The MSS evinced no regret or determination to do better.[15]

And yet with General Abrams shifting more emphasis to population security and pacification, the Phoenix (Phung Hoang) Program was more important than ever. Those five levels of VC intelligence that kept a watch over every inch of South Vietnam, from the presidential palace down to the meanest hamlet, had to be decisively met and countered if the Saigon government had any hope of turning back the communist tide. MACV and the CIA challenged the South Vietnamese to avail themselves of yet more financial and logistical support in return for a commitment to destroy 5 percent of the VCI in every province every month—yet another statistical measure of progress all but begging to be abused.[16]

In March 1969, an American team toured Kien Tuong province in IV Corps to see how the beefed-up, reenergized Phoenix program was functioning. It wasn't. They debriefed the departing US Phoenix adviser and learned that in meetings of the province's Phung Hoang Committee, the South Vietnamese Phoenix director had no official authority over anything

and slammed into "a wall of passivity" whenever he requested anything. The province's Phoenix Program was pathetic: twenty index cards with the names of twenty VC suspects, none with photos, physical descriptions, or any operational data. "No collation or analysis takes place here," the American reported. "The South Vietnamese just re-type reports and re-disseminate them to other offices." Spycatchers they were not.[17]

The Americans had advised the ARVN to name Phoenix coordinators at the province and district levels, individuals who would get the first crack at every piece of intelligence gleaned in the towns and villages. That way they could move swiftly against VC suspects. Coordinators had been assigned for new Provincial Intelligence and Operation Coordinating Centers (PIOCCs) and District Intelligence and Operation Coordinating Centers (DIOCCs), two more exotic blooms of the flourishing bureaucracy that employed so many South Vietnamese and Americans. But none of the existing agencies sent these new PIOCCs and DIOCCs information. They just continued to send their scraps of intelligence to whomever they were used to sending them to. The DIOCCs in the province, the Americans remarked, were nothing more than "paper entities," indifferently shuffled by whichever junior officer the province chief assigned the task. "Their files are sparse or non-existent, with no distinction made between VCI and ordinary VC guerrillas." They routinely reported civilian KIAs as VCI to "meet monthly neutralization quotas." None of the districts had ever produced a single targeted neutralization.[18]

With reigning apathy like this, there was no need for wary South Vietnamese to actually obstruct the work of Phoenix—total indifference would do nicely. Once again, American efforts to impose their priorities on the South Vietnamese failed, a fact glumly admitted by the MSS' ranking Phoenix adviser: "Since pursuit of VCI must necessarily rest in Vietnamese hands, we need forceful leadership at all levels, but there is little hope for improvement because there is no production of useful intelligence and no reaction to that intelligence."[19]

To bolster the South Vietnamese, Abrams instructed US units fighting in Vietnam to make the anti-VCI campaign a "top priority." VCI, Abrams explained, was more important to the enemy than his main-force units. "It's the part he can't let go down the drain." Unfortunately, the Americans did as badly at this as the South Vietnamese. In January 1969, Major Marcel Wiedmaier led a military intelligence team on a tour of I Corps to verify that all US units there were giving their "total support" to operations against the Viet Cong infrastructure. The Marines were all in, but the Army, which now dominated I Corps, showed no interest.

"Phoenix people handle anti-VCI" was a common refrain in Army units and headquarters, usually followed by "We have no specific tasking on that." At a two-hour roundtable in Da Nang, attended by every Army and Marine senior officer involved in military intelligence, Wiedmaier was most struck by the zeal of the Marines—"We've given the anti-VCI campaign our top priority and total support"—and the indifference of the Army. "Lieutenant Colonel Dunkelberger, representing the 525th Military Intelligence Group, sat silently until he was asked what he is doing in anti-VCI. He replied: 'I've got no specific tasking on that, we do orders of battle and lines of communication. The Phoenix people handle VCI.'" This was astonishing. The brigade-strength 525th Military Intelligence Group was MACV's principal intelligence arm. It was headquartered at Tan Son Nhut Airport, near MACV headquarters, yet had somehow contrived to ignore Abrams' new priority.[20]

Buck-passing was everywhere on display. Wiedmaier and his team visited the Americal Division's interrogation center at Cape Batangan. If any Army unit was going to show interest in the VCI, it should have been the Americal. They were now the biggest US division in Vietnam and had just joined with the Marines in Operation Russell Beach, seizing the VC-fortified Batangan Peninsula in a three-week battle for the sandy cape honeycombed with bunkers and tunnels. Sixty Americans had died and 12,000 civilians had been evacuated for screening, the peninsula's fishing villages having been under VC control for twenty years. Wiedmaier's team met with a captain from Americal's military intelligence staff to observe the screening and interrogation of VCI suspects seized during Operation Russell Beach. "We don't get into VCI," the captain told Wiedmaier, who must have wondered if they weren't all reading from the same script. "Phoenix handles that. We just do order of battle stuff." When Wiedmaier then asked where the Phoenix people were, the captain shrugged—he had no idea.

Wiedmaier's team returned to Americal Division headquarters at Chu Lai to present their findings to the division's intelligence chief and his deputy. The two, a colonel and a major, listened and conferred, and then the

major said: "Nobody here really understands what is and what is not VCI." Wiedmaier interrupted: "That's all spelled out in Big Mack and the VCI Newsletters." Those were intelligence products that routed information on VCI suspects from corps to division to province, and then stopped there, which was one reason—but certainly not the only one—that the DIOCCs were so ineffectual.

The two officers drew a blank, finally dispatching a sergeant to see if either of them was on the distribution list for Big Mack and the VCI Newsletter. Both of them were. The Americal colonel abashedly explained that "commanders here are really only interested in weapons and body count. VCI is of no interest to them." There were 108 men in the division's military intelligence shop, but none of them were pursuing VCI in an area that had been governed by the VC since the French colonial period. Wiedmaier pressed: were they not aware of Abrams' emphasis on VCI and his message to that effect of September 28, 1968? Yes, the colonel sighed, they were, but since *everything* from Saigon came in over Abrams' signature, *everything* had to have top priority.

In this haphazard way the US Army took the all-important hunt for VCI about as seriously as the ARVN did, which was to say not seriously at all. There were exceptions that showed what could be done and how the war could have been waged more effectively. The Marines, with their small-war emphasis and aptitude for fighting "among the people," embraced the anti-VCI campaign. The Marines exhibited all of the patience and competence in this campaign that the Army lacked. During their ops they would screen, say, 500 VCI suspects and come away with just four confirmed VCI. But those were real VCI, and their capture was a real blow to the communist organization.[21]

Wiedmaier and his team finished their tour of I Corps with a visit to Thua Thien, the scarred region around Hue, where more American troops died in the war than in any other province of South Vietnam. They met there with the province's Phoenix coordinator and his two military deputies. Phoenix, the coordinator confessed, was bedeviled by "the problem of inflated and unrealistic neutralization stats." The Army's body count scam had been extended to its reporting on VCI neutralization. Units were reporting neutralizations without knowing what job (if any) the target did within the VCI, or even the full name of the victim. The South Vietnamese routinely generated fake VCI lists to mollify Abrams and his staff. Later arguments by apologists for the American failure in Vietnam—that Phoenix "neutralized" as many as 60,000 communist agents, for example—were based on the cooked numbers of MACV, the ARVN, and the CIA, not reality.[22]

Viet Cong pressure on the South Vietnamese people tightened as Saigon's vigilance and authority slipped. In all four corps areas, VC cadres and security section chiefs organized the population to join the fight and "annihilate all tyrants." There was nothing voluntary about it. Peasants were ordered to contribute the maximum in labor and taxes. In a typical hamlet, that meant between $10 and $100 per person as well as in-kind contributions of rice. Word was passed to peasants who had fled to refugee camps in government-controlled areas to return, or their homes and property would be confiscated. The VC dispatched villagers to the markets to buy rice, salt, and fish for the communist forces, and ordered other villagers to dig the spike pits and plant the mines and booby traps that took such a bloody toll on allied forces. Others were pressed into service as porters, lugging food and ammo to the hidden main-force units. The communists were in a hurry because they assumed that any peace deal in Paris would freeze the military situation where it stood whenever a cease-fire was announced. They wanted to bring as much territory as they could under their control as rapidly as possible.[23]

Abrams responded with his own "Accelerated Pacification Program"—what his aides called a "land rush." He too wanted to snatch back as much territory as he could from the VC before a cease-fire intervened. Both sides expected an armistice to be agreed in Paris by the end of 1969. CORDS, now in the hands of Bill Colby, estimated that the VC still controlled half of the South Vietnamese population and was bidding for more, pushing "liberation committees" into government-controlled hamlets. Colby sold Abrams on a plan to bring 1,000 contested or communist-controlled hamlets under firm government control within ninety days, starting in November 1968.[24]

As always, IV Corps, the watery Mekong Delta region, remained an intractable hub of VC activity, threatening Saigon and the food supply, and serving as a land bridge between the communist sanctuaries in Cambodia, the Saigon Circle, and the lush Delta, where 6 million South Vietnamese lived and worked. The ARVN had three entire divisions in IV Corps, but

they remained as gun-shy as ever. Observing an ARVN battalion "sweeping" the ground around Sa Dec—a river port on the Mekong heavily trafficked by the VC—Peter Kann of the *Wall Street Journal* shook his head in disbelief. It was midafternoon, not night, and here were "three companies of ARVN soldiers, accompanied by armored personnel carriers, marching down the middle of the road—hardly the place to locate and engage enemy forces." This was search and avoid on a grand scale. The enemy forces, of course, would be swinging in their hammocks at this hour, resting for their nighttime exertions, when those ARVN companies would be back in their sandbagged bunkers. No one having discovered a way to fight and defeat the communists in IV Corps—it had been the source of John Paul Vann's complaints as far back as 1962—Abrams decided to approve what became one of the most notorious operations of the war: General Julien Ewell's Operation Speedy Express.[25]

Chapter 20

"I WILL NOT BE THE FIRST PRESIDENT TO LOSE A WAR"

Kien Hoa province in IV Corps was close to Saigon, home to the big towns of My Tho and Ben Tre. It had been under informal VC control since at least 1960, despite the presence there of the ARVN 7th Division and large numbers of ruff-puffs, US aircraft, and advisers. The province, girt by two arms of the Mekong River and crisscrossed by canals, had seen fierce combat during Tet, when US air strikes and artillery had flattened Ben Tre and a major of the US 9th Infantry Division had famously told reporter Peter Arnett that "it became necessary to destroy the town to save it." In the predictable way of the Vietnam War, the VC had flowed back in as the Americans flowed out after Tet, and so Kien Hoa, dominated again by the VC, became a prime target of Abe Abrams' "land rush" and Julien Ewell's Operation Speedy Express.

The Army would later investigate and cover up General Ewell's conduct, which was barbaric. In his eagerness to submit a "record-breaking" body count of 10,889 dead VC, Ewell and the 8,000 men of the 9th ID killed thousands of civilians between December 1968 and May 1969, when the grisly operation was finally terminated. Conservative estimates

submitted by the Army's own inspector general put the likely number of noncombatant deaths included in Ewell's 10,889 body count somewhere between 5,000 and 7,000.[1]

In Kien Hoa, the fifty-three-year-old Ewell ran into the same problems American officers were encountering everywhere else in Vietnam. It was hard to *find* the communists. They sidestepped the big daytime sweeps and operated at night to maintain their control over the local people and the economy. Ewell's division psychiatrist worried about the outfit's morale, with the men dealing every day "with the same old thing": base camp life in soggy, unlit tents, with everyone on bunker guard or thirty-minute alert, or life in the field, where "you walk all day and ambush at night, either sleeping in the trees or on the dikes, or just curling up in the mud with the snakes, mosquitoes, and leeches."[2]

These problems were magnified by the dense population of the Mekong Delta, which made it harder than anywhere else to use the firepower central to the American approach. Six million people were crammed into less than 15,000 square miles. The US embassy in Saigon had pressed the Army to stay out of the Delta for fear that it would end up killing too many civilians. But in the "land rush" of 1969, Ewell's 9th ID, which earlier had operated as a "Mobile Riverine Force," attacking the VC in the streams and marshes of the Delta, was authorized to carry the fight into the cluttered towns and villages. Of Abrams' "one-war" concept, Ewell commented: "Like most powerful ideas it was very simple. Also, like most ideas in Vietnam it was difficult in execution."[3]

Especially, he might have added, when executed his way. The result was exactly the carnage the State Department had feared. In Operation Speedy Express, Ewell took the 1st Brigade of the 9th ID into Kien Hoa and let them rip. He used fifty howitzers, fifty gunships, and 3,400 tactical air strikes to desolate the province in four months of mayhem, relying on sudden air assaults to take on the small VC units where they appeared—"barreling in at 120 knots, the skids only a few feet above the rice, then slamming to a hovering halt with a pounding flapping of rotor blades."[4]

Pitched battles were rare. Normally the division smashed down villages and farms, machine-gunned and rocketed peasants from the air, and burned fields, orchards, and hamlets. Among the claimed body count of 10,889, Ewell produced only 748 captured weapons. The 76:1 "kill ratio" that the general trumpeted as evidence of his prowess was ten to fifteen times the norm. Would not so many dead VC have taken more Americans with them? Hospital admissions in the province were overwhelmingly attributed to careless American fire. In Ben Tre, 76 percent of civilians admitted to the hospital during the operation had wounds from American munitions.[5]

Ewell and his chief of staff, Colonel Ira Hunt, defended what they did. "We took the night away from the enemy," Hunt boasted. "They just totally unraveled in the Delta." Hunt commanded Ewell's 1st Brigade during Speedy Express. He equipped gunship pilots and door gunners with night-vision equipment, and instructed his troops and pilots to assume that anything moving in the dark was VC. Hunt named these night flights the "Phantom III hunter-killer program."

Louis Janowski, a US adviser in the Delta who ended up summoning medevacs for civilians wounded by Phantom III, called the program "non-selective terrorism." He confirmed that the vast majority of Phantom III's victims were not VC. He personally witnessed ops in which fewer than one in ten of the victims was VC. The killing, in other words, was entirely indiscriminate, just mowing down the general population to hike the body count. "Air sports" was how one jacked-up gunship pilot described his work: there was "nothing finer, you're up there at two thousand, you're God, just open up the flexies and watch it pee, nail those slime to the paddy wall, nothing finer, double back and get the caribou."[6]

Colonel Hunt also expanded the use of snipers. A sniper team was attached to each of the 1st Brigade's four battalions and basically told to shoot anyone who appeared in their sights. Two veterans of the 9th ID's operations in the Delta, future senator Chuck Hagel and David "Hack" Hackworth, had an entirely negative view of the operation. Hackworth, who commanded Hunt's best infantry battalion, called the colonel a "liar" and judged Hunt's "victory" in Speedy Express "as make-believe as a paper moon."[7]

Other officers reported that they were inserted into the field and told to stay there till they had increased their body counts. R&R allocations, stand-downs, and medals were made contingent on high body counts. The eagerness of the grunts to escape the misery of the Delta for one of MACV's stand-down R&R centers, such as the "Tay Ninh Holiday Inn" or "Waikiki East" in Cu Chi, appears to have made them more willing to shoot civilians

and add them to the body count. "Free-fire zones," where anyone could be judged an enemy and killed, were liberally granted. Artillery, tac air, gunships, snipers, and even B-52s attacked without restraint in these areas. Air strikes and artillery were routinely fired into populated areas. Hackworth noted that Ewell's 9th ID took credit for 20,000 VC dead in 1968–1969, yet produced only 2,000 weapons for all of those KIAs. "How much of the 'body count' consisted of civilians?" Hackworth asked.[8]

Commanders like Ewell and Hunt were reacting to their frustration with the way the enemy operated. Sampans, the motorized fishing boats that plied the rivers and canals, were often stocked with goods for communist forces—ammo, rice, fish sauce, sugar, milk, water purification tablets, hammocks, mosquito netting, and all of the other things the guerrillas needed to operate in the marshy wilderness. In most cases, the sampans were owned by an entrepreneur who would buy goods in a market and then sell them to the VC at 400 percent markups. Was such a person a civilian or a combatant? It was hard to say. The sampans would be unloaded by hired laborers, who would lug the cargo to cache points, where, at night, VC troops would appear to carry the items to their jungle hideouts. Were the laborers civilians or combatants? In any event, there were simply more sampans and trawlers moving around on any given day than could be inspected. The Mobile Riverine Force inspected about 70,000 a year, which hinted at the sheer volume. Ewell and Hunt decided to shoot first and ask questions later, if at all.[9]

A year after the operation ended, a 9th ID whistleblower sent anonymous letters to General Westmoreland, the Army chief of staff in Washington, alleging that civilians had been slaughtered with the full knowledge and complicity of commanders—to drive up the body count. The whistleblower, who signed the letters "Concerned Sergeant," revealed that the 9th ID under General Ewell had perpetrated "a My Lai each month for over a year" in the Delta and had gotten away with it. Ewell had acquired a nickname—"the Butcher of the Delta"—which he seemed to enjoy, joking that his peers considered him more ruthless than Attila the Hun.[10]

Abrams refused interview requests on the subject and referred reporters to his MACV spokesmen, who feigned ignorance of the Speedy Express rules of engagement and determinedly hushed up the controversy, proclaiming the operation a resounding success. Abrams dismissed VC reports of atrocities in the Mekong Delta as "propaganda." He called Ewell's Speedy

Express performance "magnificent" and promoted Ewell to the corps command of II Field Force, which defended III Corps.

In Washington, Westmoreland's office identified the "Concerned Sergeant" as George Lewis, who had served in the Delta with the 9th ID from June 1968 to May 1969 and received a Purple Heart. Lewis had served in Hunt's brigade and Hackworth's battalion as a radio operator. As such, he had overheard Ewell's "cussing and screaming" and Hack's radio calls. They contained none of the compassion or principled opposition that Hackworth took credit for in his memoirs. Hack, Lewis wrote, would say things like "I don't give a shit, shoot them anyway, women or not." Reading these allegations, Westmoreland made no effort to contact Lewis, and he and Abrams stamped out efforts by the secretary of the Army's general counsel to investigate the alleged atrocities. Coming on the heels of My Lai, it would have been too embarrassing for the Army, not least because all of the principals—Westmoreland, Abrams, Ewell, and Hunt—were West Point graduates. Their failures were the Army's failures.[11]

In 2002, journalist Nick Turse did some digging in the National Archives of the United States and discovered files that converted 1969's allegations of atrocity into fact. It was Ewell's own senior officer debriefing report, submitted in September 1969, that kindled Turse's suspicion, the general allowing that in many areas where "discriminate and selective use of firepower was not feasible, the countryside looked like the Verdun battlefields." That reference to the desolated moonscape of 1916, where more than fifty French villages had been permanently erased from the map in World War I's most notorious battle, persuaded Turse to investigate further.

He found George Lewis' ten-page letter to Westmoreland of May 1970, and two others, which the Army had also suppressed. The letters described orders and policies within the 9th ID that made civilian massacres inevitable. "Sir," Lewis opened the first letter, "the 9th Division did nothing to prevent the killing, and by pushing the body count so hard, we were 'told' to kill many times more Vietnamese than at My Lai, and very few per cent of them did we know were enemy."

Sergeant Lewis then listed his evidence: "In case you don't think I mean lots of Vietnamese got killed this way, I can give you some idea how many. A battalion would kill maybe 15 to 20 a day. With 4 battalions in the Brigade that would be maybe 40 to 50 a day or 1,200 to 1,500 a month,

easy. (One battalion claimed almost 1000 body counts one month!) If I am only 10% right, and believe me it's lots more, then I am trying to tell you about 120–150 murders, or a My Lai each month for over a year." The sniper teams, Lewis wrote, never rested, and they made no distinction between VC and civilians. "The snipers would get 5 or 10 a day, and I think all 4 battalions had sniper teams. That's 20 a day or at least 600 each month." The snipers alone, Lewis surmised, probably killed as many civilians as had been slaughtered at My Lai.[12]

The "number-one killer" of civilians during Operation Speedy Express was the 1st Brigade's policy of shooting anyone who ran. If a peasant ran from the approach of a US platoon or helicopter—and who wouldn't, with the "Butcher of the Delta" afield?—he or she would be treated as VC and killed. "Helicopters would hover over a guy in a field till he got scared and run and they'd zap him," Lewis wrote.

Snipers were encouraged to shoot civilians even if they didn't run, to pad a body count that was relentlessly driven upward. "The General in charge and all the commanders were riding us all the time to get a big body count." Lewis noted that all commanders were embarrassed by their failure to find weapons among all of the fallen "VC," and so lies were offered instead—saying, for example, that they had captured weapons but destroyed them by dropping them into streams, canals, and paddies. They said this even during dry season in the Delta, when the streams, canals, and paddies were dusty flats. "The General," Lewis wrote, "must have known this was made up."[13]

Colonel Ira Hunt, presiding in his command and control helicopter, drove the killing to insane heights. He later denied it all in postwar interviews, but Lewis, pilots who flew Hunt around, and other dissidents such as General Robert Gard, who commanded the 9th ID's five artillery battalions during Speedy Express, confirmed it. Gard recalled that Hunt cherished his nickname and call sign, "Rice-Paddy Daddy." The colonel, Gard said, was even more "berserk" than Ewell in the quest for corpses. A pilot who flew Hunt's command and control chopper described Hunt ordering his door gunner to shoot anyone on the ground in black pajamas. "Well sir, I thought workers in the fields wore black pajamas," the pilot protested. "No, not around here," Hunt replied. "Black pajamas are Viet Cong."

Sergeant Lewis described patrols where "Hunt used to holler and curse over the radio and talk about the goddamn gooks and tell the gunships to shoot the sonsofbitches, because this is a free-fire zone." If they were unarmed women, it made no difference to Hunt. When artillery forward observers (FOs) refused to fire on populated areas, battalion and company commanders—intimidated by Hunt—would order the guns to fire anyway. "The FO would tell my company commander that he couldn't shoot in the village because it was in the population overlay." Hearing this, the battalion commander "would get mad and cuss over the radio at my company commander and declare a contact [with the enemy] so the FO would shoot anyway." Not warning shots—high explosive, right into the houses, right away. Abrams and his staff *must* have spotted the anomaly that the 9th ID had the highest kill ratio in Vietnam but the lowest weapons-captured-to-enemy-killed ratio.

John Paul Vann returned to the Delta in February 1969 as civilian director of pacification efforts in IV Corps. He was appalled by everything he saw. As a civilian CORDS adviser when Ewell's year of command was running out, Vann described the Phantom III and daylight "hunter-killer" missions as especially harmful: "The U.S. is on very shaky ground. Literally hundreds of examples have been documented by irate advisers, both military and civilian." Vann went along on many of the raids and reported that no effort was made to distinguish between civilians and VC. The pilots and gunners were ordered to kill every living being they saw on the ground, including farm animals.[14]

Ultimately, there was method to the madness of Ewell and Hunt. They were trying to solve two problems quickly. Militarily, they wanted to overcome the problem that hampered every operation in Vietnam—the inability to find and kill a stealthy enemy. Seven out of every eight operations in 1968–1969 made no contact with the enemy. Ewell and Hunt introduced "night raids," using Cobra gunships and heliborne infantry to hit villages suspected of harboring VC. This flushed some VC, who had come into the villages to eat, rest, and proselytize, but killed far more civilians. When Abrams called their performance "magnificent" and "unparalleled and unequaled," knowing full well that the body count was faked, Ewell and Hunt can be forgiven for assuming that they had solved the first problem,

however cruelly and immorally. After all, with no firm rules of engagement in force, *all* of Ewell's operations "made contact with the enemy." It looked like progress, the rarest glimmer of good news.[15]

The second problem was more political. Ewell and Hunt were instruments in Abrams' "land rush"—to claw territory out of VC hands before an armistice was struck in Paris. They successfully "liberated" 120,000 inhabitants of the Delta and pushed the communists away from the big towns. Before Speedy Express, the VC had controlled 45 percent of the Delta's population. After the ferocious operation, they controlled just 24 percent. Some point to operations like this as proof of the success of Abrams' "better war." But what a "liberation" it was. Thousands of innocents were slaughtered, villages and towns destroyed, livestock, schools, and clinics liquidated. And those 120,000 who were successfully "pacified" were anything but. They flowed into more wretched refugee centers to contemplate all that they had lost and to hear the increasingly attractive entreaties of the Viet Cong, who worked the refugee camps and urban shantytowns as assiduously as the hamlets. Abe Abrams' determination to "exploit superior firepower and mobility" was nothing new, and it had the same effect as Westy's airmobile operations: it killed civilians.[16]

When *Newsweek* reporter Kevin Buckley toured the Delta two years later, he discovered that Operation Speedy Express had touched the lives of literally everyone there, and not for the better: "In each of the many places where I went, the testimony was the same: 100 killed here, 200 killed there. One old man summed up all the stories: 'The Americans killed some VC, but not many. But of the civilians, there were a large number killed.'"[17]

Jeffrey Record, a twenty-five-year-old graduate student at Johns Hopkins University, spent a year as a civilian adviser for psyops in Bac Lieu province, which bordered Kien Hoa. Record was in the Delta during Operation Speedy Express and was struck by the speed with which the rule of "modest restraint" when it came to the use of firepower in densely populated areas was replaced by the Ewell-Hunt practice of unrestrained firepower. Until Operation Speedy Express, provinces like Bac Lieu and Kien Hoa had been off-limits to naval bombardments, B-52 strikes, and even .50-caliber machine guns, whose range and velocity made them difficult to confine. Air strikes by gunships or fighters could be summoned from the IV Corps air base in Can Tho in a pinch, but, given the nature of the war in the Delta, they were rarely needed or even suitable. It would take thirty

minutes for friendly aircraft to arrive overhead. By then, the enemy would be gone.[18]

Restraint in the use of firepower, however, had always been opposed, Record observed, "by older officers, many close to retirement, for whom Vietnam provided their first and last chance to see real combat." Such men, Record recalled, "found the idea of restraint incompatible with war" and never ceased agitating against it. Record, who went on to teach strategy at the Air War College in Montgomery, Alabama, noted that officials in favor of "modest restraint"—the province and district chiefs and the US advisers attached to their headquarters—would marshal three arguments against these trigger-happy officers: the moral argument that innocents would die, the political argument that neutrals would be converted to VC, and the military argument that there were few if any targets to warrant the massive application of artillery and air strikes in the Mekong Delta, where full-time, hard-core VC were constantly moving and hidden.

To the moral argument, the firepower advocates answered: "War is hell." To the political argument, they answered that by driving the people into refugee camps, they would at least put the civilians under government control and deny their resources to the VC. The military argument they "dismissed out of hand." If there were no targets, they mulishly insisted, what was the harm in strafing fields, woods, and streams?

Record made another important observation, too often overlooked in discussions of the war. Mowing down civilians and their huts came to serve a crucial *bureaucratic* purpose. In Bac Lieu province, there were an estimated 3,000 VC opposed by 20,000 government troops—elements of the ARVN 21st Division plus ruff-puffs and the new Popular Self-Defense Force (PSDF) organized by Vice President Ky. In the entire province, there were only three small "free-fire zones," where locals had been evacuated and airpower and artillery could be used freely. Everywhere else, the people were densely packed around the hamlets and canals.

The only feasible way to defeat the VC in this environment was to pry them out one by one, using police methods and intelligence. But when Ewell made Cobra gunships widely available to every province in IV Corps for Phantom III raids in October 1968, Record noted that the pressure from higher headquarters to use them was too powerful to resist. Record's province, Bac Lieu, would get them on Mondays and Thursdays. In theory, they

were meant to destroy enemy personnel and installations and generally "harass and terrorize" the VC. This ignored the problem that no one knew where the VC and their "installations" were. If they did, those 20,000 South Vietnamese troops and thousands more police would have been sufficient to round them up.

But no one focused on *that* problem. They focused on another: the *programmatic* need to find a use for Bell Helicopter's new Cobra gunship, which was a technological marvel and a killing machine whose airspeed (170 miles per hour) and rate of fire from its flex guns was so high that it was inevitably underutilized in the crowded Delta. The Cobra, recently introduced to the war, was an armored attack helicopter built to survive antiaircraft fire around hot LZs and to give withering fire support to embattled troops on the ground. It had a crew of two—pilot and gunner—and its only load was ammunition for its guns: two rocket pods on stub wings with fifty-two 70 mm rockets, and either a chin-mounted turret mini gun that fired 100 rounds a *second* or twin 40 mm grenade launchers that pumped out 400 grenades a minute.

MACV pressured the province chiefs and their senior American advisers to welcome the Phantom III missions and find a use for the Cobras. The pressure was not subtle. If the Cobras were not fully utilized—if they did not generate body count and devastation that could be relayed to Saigon and Washington as "indispensable achievements"—then the Cobras would be sent to other theaters, or face program cuts in Congress.

To avoid this fate, IV Corps headquarters cut the Delta into slices and sent Phantom III missions of two or three Cobras on a fixed schedule over every slice every week. No effort was expended to figure out which slice needed Cobras more than another. They all got Cobras twice a week and were expected to submit impressive results. The VC in every province immediately figured out what days were Phantom III days and laid low, especially in the "free-fire zones," which the Cobras rocketed with thousands of dollars of wasted ordnance. Of the few unscheduled missions, Record noted that the VC received advance warning of them from their network of informers in every ARVN and provincial headquarters.

Had that been the extent of the waste, it would have been manageable. But it wasn't. There was constant organizational pressure to claim more enemy "killed by air" and "structures destroyed," none being available in the *desolated free-fire zones*. And so the Phantom III missions began attacking *populated areas* and classifying the dead and wounded there as Viet Cong. Record, who interviewed VC defectors in the province, was told that the Cobras were shooting up the canals and sweeping over fields to mow down the peasants and their water buffalo. An American working in Bac Lieu's hospital told him that, despite a decrease in combat operations, more and more civilians were being admitted with wounds from Cobra rockets, mini guns, and grenades. Most of them were women and children.

Record took this information to the American officers in Bac Lieu's Tactical Operations Center (TOC), where he was told: "We don't shoot individuals on the ground unless they run away when the Cobras approach. People that run must be VC. Why else would they run unless they had something to hide?" Record shared his findings with the province senior adviser, who told him that official pressure to use the Cobras was now irresistible and that he would do his best to restrain the Phantom III missions in the same way that he had tried to restrain the use of artillery and tac air in the province. "He failed to grasp," Record later wrote, "that the problem lay not in their *indiscriminate* use but in the very nature of the gunships themselves. *Any* use of Cobras in a densely populated province having only a small enemy presence would be indiscriminate."[19]

Record asked to ride along in the command and control helicopter of a Phantom III mission. He said he wanted to scatter psyops leaflets, but his real purpose was to see for himself what was going on. He was stunned by what he observed from the air: "Returning from my first mission I witnessed the machinegunning of an entire herd of water buffalo along with the six or seven buffalo boys who were tending the herd. No command had been given. The Cobras simply broke formation and began their deadly dives. Within seconds the still waters of the rice paddy in which the buffalos and their little friends had been resting was transformed into a bloody ooze littered with bits of mangled flesh. The dead boys and the water buffalo were added to the official body count of the Viet Cong."

Once back on the ground in Bac Lieu, Record went to the TOC and demanded—"as a human being and a Psychological Operations Adviser"—that the Cobra pilots be punished. He got the runaround: "They're not under our command," "Can Tho has jurisdiction," and so on. "What had started out as a program to hamper Viet Cong operations," Record concluded,

"had become an unmanageable and monstrous terror directed against the entire rural population." Scruples and conscience availed nothing against the measures of success required by Abrams and Ewell. "Pilots had become mesmerized by the familiar litany of aerial warfare in Vietnam—'kills by air, sampans sunk, enemy structures destroyed.' The Phantom program had increased by twofold the enemy body count demanded every month by insatiable computers in Saigon."[20]

As the Operation Speedy Express "land rush" petered out in June 1969, Nixon flew west and Thieu flew east to convene on Midway Island. Nixon had wanted to hold the summit in California, but he worried that it might be marred by antiwar protests, to say nothing of Thieu's intransigence. Midway, whose only inhabitants were a few thousand well-behaved US government employees, was chosen instead. The peace talks that had resumed in Paris after Nixon's inauguration were still going nowhere. The communist demands for a total US withdrawal, the resignation of Thieu and his ministers, and a vote by the South Vietnamese people for a Provisional Revolutionary Government molded by Hanoi collided with Thieu's "Four No's": no recognition of the VC, no neutralization of South Vietnam, no coalition government, and no surrender of territory.[21]

In Hanoi, the politburo was absorbing the heavy, painful losses of 1968–1969 and adjusting. They officially abandoned the "quick military victory" scheme that had powered Tet and Mini-Tet, and opted instead in mid-1969 for a policy of "partial victories during the period of U.S. withdrawal." Their team in Paris would delay American negotiators while giving every appearance of cooperation. They called this revised strategy "talk and fight." With President Thieu carping about American faithlessness, Nixon assured him at the Midway Conference on June 8 that Washington would back Saigon to the hilt and insist on the allied country's "self-determination without interference" by the hordes of NVA and VC troops camped in South Vietnam and the sanctuaries.[22]

How Nixon would insist on *anything* was hard to see. The chief takeaway of the Midway Conference was that the Americans were leaving as quickly as they could. MACV's mission statement was quietly amended. The old one had called for the defeat and removal of the NVA from South Vietnam. The new one pledged nothing more than "maximum assistance" to Saigon and a rapid expansion of the ARVN and the territorial forces.

Nixon officially terminated the Johnson administration policies of escalation and attrition at Midway and announced his own intention to withdraw 115,000 American troops over the next seven months.

The force of 543,000 American troops present in Vietnam when Nixon was sworn in would be leaving as fast as they could be moved to the exits. More funds would be earmarked for "improvement and modernization" to permit the replacement of Americans with South Vietnamese. The Big Red One, which had been holding the Iron Triangle since 1965, would be replaced by the ARVN 5th Division. The US 4th Infantry Division, which had fought so many battles in the Central Highlands since 1966, would be replaced by the ARVN 22nd Division. The US 9th Infantry Division, which had been in the Delta since 1967, would be replaced by the ARVN 7th Division. Nixon's "Midway Package" pledged to offset these American "redeployments" by increasing the South Vietnamese regular armed forces to a million troops in 1970 and the irregular ruff-puff and self-defense forces to 2.5 million troops or more.[23]

Nixon's Midway Package also called for an "accelerated pacification program" that had the usual ring of fakery—intended more to check boxes and peddle statistics than solve problems on the ground. The aim was to rapidly bring *all* of South Vietnam's population under government control, as if that had not already been tried many times by many programs.[24]

The Saigon government remained unreformed, its pillars the same as they were under Diem: the army, the uniformed province and district chiefs, the religious communities, and, lastly, the political parties. All American and South Vietnamese hopes now resided in President Thieu, who had been funded and shielded by the Americans and increasingly enjoyed an unassailable position. But for what exactly? Thieu's network of power owed everything to the Americans and would collapse if anything happened to Thieu. Like the weak and powerless parties, Thieu's network was not institutionalized, and it was relatively old and graying. Young people gave up on it and turned to the Viet Cong. The best that could be hoped for, sympathetic foreign observers noted, was an authoritarian regime with local democracy at the village level and a moderate president in charge of a well-led and contented army. But even those modest goals looked far out of reach.[25]

In Paris, the negotiations had been deadlocked for fifteen months. In South Vietnam, Hanoi's "neo-revolutionary guerrilla war," announced in

April 1969, was proving far more potent than in the past thanks to all of the new Soviet and Chinese weaponry that had been passed down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in the meantime. Marine and Army records in 1969 became a dismal catalog of grunts maimed and killed by booby traps, command-detonated mines, ambushes, and regular mortar and rocket attacks on fuel and ammo dumps, airfields, and ports. US aircraft had to make short runs and steep climbs out of air bases all over the country to offer the smallest possible target to VC with shoulder-fired rockets assumed to be hidden just beyond the perimeter of every allied airfield and helipad. Returning to base, these same aircraft "crash dived," dropping onto their runways like a stone.

The Defense Intelligence Agency began enumerating new measures of failure—"aircraft destroyed on the ground" and "bridges damaged and destroyed." Both categories showed rising weekly losses in all corps areas in 1969. An analyst was called before the Senate to estimate the future cost of death pensions and disability payments for the tens of thousands of Americans killed and the 160,000 Americans severely wounded in the war. He confirmed that those items would end up costing more than the war itself. Pressed to say exactly how much, he threw up his arms in frustration: "The impact of Vietnam is so gigantic and diffuse that no adequate calculation can be made at this time."[26]

In the course of 1969, more South Vietnamese were brought back under government control. By year-end, Saigon claimed that it controlled 92 percent of the population, as compared with 67 percent two years earlier on the eve of Tet. Much of this "control" was owed not to Saigon's prowess but to the American creation of refugees, so many that a population that had been 80 percent rural ten years earlier was now half rural and half urban. For the communists, the urban population was harder to reach and exploit. This explained Hanoi's strategic shift in 1969 back to "protracted warfare," to "take back the cities, countryside, and the mountains" and defeat Abrams' pacification program and strategy of clear and hold.[27]

Hanoi had a clear view of Nixon's plan and what they needed to do to thwart it. Their own planning documents stressed the need to attack US forces, inflict casualties, demoralize the Americans, and stop them from "exiting the war from a position of strength." The United States had to be driven out swiftly and completely, so that they could not "deescalate gradually" and take the time to modernize the ARVN. The communists planned to "neutralize and disintegrate" the largely unimproved South Vietnamese military so that it could never "clear and hold" the country and successfully "Vietnamize" the war.[28]

Nixon and Kissinger, who had deliberately prolonged this senseless war to get into office, now struggled to terminate it. They would not announce the first troop withdrawals until June 1969, but they knew that they had no mandate to escalate the war. Hanoi knew this too. With Hanoi refusing to recognize the Thieu government in the Paris talks and upbraiding Nixon for "demoting" the peace talks in his effort to gain military leverage, the negotiations stalled for months at a time. Nixon impatiently looked for ways to force Le Duan back to the table. Wheeler and Abrams recommended that he target the communist sanctuaries in Cambodia, which fueled the war in III and IV Corps. The president could blockade the port of Sihanoukville, or he could strike across the border with American troops. *That* would get Hanoi's attention.[29]

Prince Sihanouk had pursued his policy of "extreme neutrality" until this point. In practice, this meant cozying up to China and tolerating NVA and VC sanctuaries along Cambodia's border with South Vietnam. The Cambodians had no love for the South Vietnamese, but even if they had, their population was so small and their military so weak that Sihanouk felt that he had no choice but to permit Hanoi to use his territory, especially with the Americans so obviously losing the war in South Vietnam.

But parliamentary elections in 1966 had returned a conservative, nationalist majority, determined to erase the North Vietnamese sanctuaries and restore Cambodian sovereignty. General Lon Nol, who had served the French until 1954, had been named prime minister of a new Government of National Salvation. Two years later, in August 1968, Cambodia and the United States had resumed diplomatic relations. Prince Sihanouk had begun tacking back to the right. He feared the implications of Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, the spreading power of Hanoi on his territory, and the rising threat of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge.[30]

To exploit this thaw in the Cambodian-American relationship, Nixon, Wheeler, and Abrams had decided to bomb the sanctuaries in Cambodia shortly after Nixon took office in 1969. Wheeler and Abrams deemed those Operation Menu raids "a prerequisite" to clean out the sanctuaries before

US forces began withdrawing so that the ARVN could battle the communists on more favorable terms. Nixon also wanted to show his teeth. With Hanoi refusing to concede Nixon's chief demand in Paris, which was that North Vietnam accept the Thieu government as a legitimate partner for peace, Nixon was desperate to up the ante—to, as Kissinger put it, land a "savage, punishing blow against this third-rate power." Nixon's "madman theory" held that enemies needed to fear that the president might use *any* amount of force to achieve his objective.[31]

Nixon, who had been Eisenhower's vice president in 1953, believed that the Chinese had agreed to end the Korean War only because they had feared that Ike might use nuclear weapons against them if they did not. Nixon was now trying to re-create that dynamic in Southeast Asia by increasing strategic bombing. "Must use the great power of the office *to do something*," he mused. "Now is the time to go for broke."

Nixon would start with the Cambodian sanctuaries, then hit the ones in Laos, and persuade Hanoi that he might just continue up the ladder to resume bombing North Vietnam with conventional and even nuclear weapons. The president ordered up a plan for this in 1969 and called it Operation Duck Hook. If Hanoi refused to bend in Paris, Nixon would bomb the Red River dikes (drowning the North Vietnamese population and food supply), carpet-bomb the country, mine the harbors, and, if the politburo still refused to yield, drop nuclear bombs around Hanoi and Haiphong. "I will not be the first president of the United States to lose a war," Nixon growled.[32]

Nixon's gambit would begin in Cambodia. This was hugely problematic, for Cambodia was a neutral nation. Bombing there could not precede a congressional declaration of war, yet Congress, eager to quit the war, would never even consider such a declaration. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Secretary of State William Rogers, and even Kissinger, Nixon's national security adviser, had opposed the "secret bombing" for this reason—that it would not remain secret, and that it would incite lawmakers and the public to still greater opposition to the war. It would also derail or further delay the already faltering peace talks in Paris.

Nixon, however, was adamant. He authorized Operation Menu, an air campaign so secret that special arrangements had to be made to conceal it from the Air Force chief of staff and secretary, as well as everyone else outside a narrow inner circle. American B-52s pounded the Cambodian base areas for over a year—from March 1969 until May 1970.[33]

The first Menu raid—Operation Breakfast—was carried out by sixty B-52s flying from Guam. The aircrews dumped their bombs on Base Area 353, the region of Cambodia known to Americans as the "Fishhook," which was considered the likely headquarters of Pham Hung's COSVN. The devastation was as expected: each of the eight-engined B-52s released its thirty tons of bombs along an axis that was 1,000 feet wide and four miles long. But efforts by a ground team to discover what they actually hit were driven off by unsubdued North Vietnamese troops. A second Special Forces team sent to resume the search and "mop up" COSVN mutinied rather than march to a certain death. "We've done nothing more than poke a beehive with a stick," a Green Beret sneered. B-52s were no more than a palliative. The enemy still held the contested ground.[34]

But Nixon understood that airpower was the only power he had left—the only lever he had to shift Hanoi. Abrams, who saw his lever of ground troops shrinking, agreed and provided coordinates and ground controllers for new Menu missions stretching into 1970. Operation Lunch hit Base Area 609; Operation Snack hit Base Area 351; Operation Dinner hit Base Area 352; Operation Supper hit Base Area 740, and Operation Dessert hit Base Area 350. Four thousand sorties rained 104,000 tons of bombs on the NVA sanctuaries.

The secrecy of this "secret bombing" was maintained by subterfuge. Commands were relayed inside a tight circle, essentially the president, Wheeler, Laird, Abrams, General Bruce Holloway, who led the Strategic Air Command, and Admiral John McCain Jr., who was the CINCPAC in Honolulu. Once bombers were aloft, with targets inside South Vietnam, ground computers would switch their targets to new ones inside Cambodia. Only the pilots and navigators, who were sworn to secrecy, knew that the targets were in neutral Cambodia.[35]

All of this effort inconvenienced but did not dissuade the NVA, who simply moved things around to continue the war. They learned to disperse their shelters and supplies in such a way that they would not all be hit by the linear pattern of the B-52s. The communists moved critical infrastructure deeper into Cambodia, further destabilizing Sihanouk's regime.

The NVA May Offensive in 1969 was no less potent than that of the previous year, proof that supplies and troops were still moving smoothly through the sanctuaries. And Nixon's "secret" did not last long. In May 1969, William Beecher revealed it in the *New York Times*, setting off a desperate hunt inside the Nixon administration for the source of the leak. Kissinger aide Morton Halperin was illegally wiretapped for twenty-one months—another precursor, like the Chennault affair, of the dirty tricks that would lead to Watergate.[36]

The fury Nixon felt about his inability to terminate the war could only be directed inward, not outward. With the budget and dollar under continuous pressure, and the Senate in June 1969 demanding a greater voice in "national commitments" abroad, the White House announced a new Nixon Doctrine in July 1969 that made clear that the United States would share the burden of global defense with willing "proxies" such as South Vietnam, Israel, and Iran while reducing US troop deployments and easing tensions with China and the Soviet Union. America, Nixon said, had "a full plate" of commitments and would undertake no new ones "unless our national interests are very vitally involved." Countries under threat, from the NATO allies to South Korea and South Vietnam, would have to provide the manpower for their own defense. "Self-help" was the new mantra.[37]

But time was needed to "Vietnamize" South Vietnam and prepare it for its front-line role, and time was running out, for the communist plan to force the Americans out of the war was working. Nixon's support was softening. Students were restive. The press was critical. In June the Senate's National Commitments Resolution had passed overwhelmingly. It defined what a "national commitment" like the war in Vietnam was, and insisted that all future commitments be subject to legislative approval. Nixon's room for maneuver continued to shrink.

Nixon had campaigned and won on his plan to end the war, but there was no apparent plan or progress. Negotiations had resumed in Paris on January 16, 1969, but nothing had been achieved other than agreement on the shape of the conference table. It would be two separate tables with a smaller one inserted in between, so that the VC could pretend that they were sitting alongside the South Vietnamese government and the South Vietnamese could pretend that they were not. In April, American deaths in Vietnam reached 33,630, nearly 10,000 more than when Johnson had left office, and more than had died in the Korean War.

In May, the VC delegation in Paris had demanded a unilateral American withdrawal from Vietnam as the essential first step to peace. Nixon had responded with his first public plan to end the war. It was a fantasy, vowing to re-create the conditions of 1954: withdrawal of all foreign forces, implementation of the Geneva Accords, and internationally supervised elections. Nixon and Kissinger naively assumed that they could make Hanoi withdraw its forces from South Vietnam or, at the very least, permit the Americans to remove their forces in unhurried increments as ARVN forces were improved and modernized.

Hanoi demurred, demanding instead that they immediately be given a fixed timetable for the removal of all American troops. Either way, the communist forces would keep killing Americans until Nixon quailed. Internally, the NVA characterized their 1969 spring offensive as "a significant tactical and a great strategic victory, for we killed more Americans than we did in the 1968 spring offensive." Hanoi approvingly noted the political effect in the United States: "The anti-war movement flared up again strongly demanding the withdrawal of U.S. troops." In early August 1969, an increasingly frantic Nixon instructed Kissinger to hand an ultimatum to Le Duc Tho in Paris. Hanoi had until November 1 "to make major progress toward a solution." If there was no progress, Nixon would unleash "measures of the greatest consequence," by which he meant Operation Duck Hook.[38]

Opposition to the war took another ugly turn. "Give us six months," Kissinger had confidently told critics of the war when the new administration had taken office. Six months had passed with nothing to show for it. The Weathermen, a violent faction of the antiwar Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), vowed to "bring the war home," to expose Americans to the violence that was being heaped on Southeast Asia.

On October 8, 1969, the Weathermen launched the "Days of Rage" demonstrations in Chicago. Several hundred demonstrators trashed four blocks of Chicago's Gold Coast neighborhood, smashing windows, setting cars alight, and drawing a massive police reaction. The next day, 2,000 SDS protesters marched through Chicago, this time peacefully. The following day, 300 Weathermen returned, this time to the Loop, where they smashed more cars and storefronts. On October 15, 1969, more than a million

Americans—alarmed by the "secret bombing" and the slow pace of Nixon's promised withdrawal from Vietnam—marched in massive, synchronized demonstrations and held peace vigils in Washington, DC, New York, Boston, Chicago, Detroit, Denver, Miami, Los Angeles, and many other cities. These marches, the first nationwide protests against Nixon's conduct of the war, were collectively named the Moratorium to End the War in Vietnam. The honeymoon Nixon had enjoyed as a new president was over.[39]

Nixon was rattled. Polls showed that 55 percent of Americans now called themselves "doves." The number of self-described "hawks" had fallen to 31 percent, from 44 percent a year earlier. Support for the war dropped in every poll. The Moratorium was the first time that politically moderate middle-class families had come out to protest, and they did it peacefully, less in anger than in sadness at the mounting losses and destruction in Vietnam, as well as Nixon's "token pullout" of just 25,000 troops.[40]

"You don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows," Bob Dylan had sung—giving the radicals their name—and the wind was blowing harder than ever against Nixon's efforts to end the war on his terms. The Moratorium movement posed great danger to Nixon. It planned to organize more "national shutdowns" like the one on October 15 to oppose the horrors of the war and hold at least one "peace day" a month to stress the war's economic cost: 19 cents of every American tax dollar being spent in Vietnam, 54 cents of every tax dollar being spent on the US military. The Moratorium leaders hoped at the very least to provoke a taxpayer revolt. For their part, the Weather Underground mocked these moderates of the Moratorium movement. They were, the terrorists scoffed, "Johnny-come-latelies, Kennedy liberals responsible for the Vietnam War—45,000 dead later they come out against the war."[41]

These splits in the antiwar movement were cold comfort for the Nixon administration, which agonized over the rising tide of opposition. First Nixon tried mockery against these threats, dispatching Vice President Spiro Agnew to blast the spirit of "national masochism encouraged by an effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals." Nixon vowed that he would not be swayed by "anarchy in the streets," but that so mischaracterized what had happened during the Moratorium that he went on television on November 3, just a year after his election, to plead for more time and patience.[42]

Nixon appealed to America's "great silent majority," pledging that "anything is negotiable except the right of the people of South Vietnam to determine their own future." He concluded with a swing at the antiwar movement: "Let us be united against defeat. North Vietnam cannot defeat or humiliate the United States. Only Americans can do that." After briefly jumping in the polls, he exulted in the Oval Office: "We've got those liberal bastards on the run, and we're going to keep them on the run now." It was false bravado. The public was more excited by Nixon's pledge in the speech to "Vietnamize" the war completely and to enact a "timetable" for complete American withdrawal than by anything else in it.[43]

Two days before the speech, Nixon had been compelled, as he himself put it, "to face the fact that the raging anti-war controversy had probably destroyed the credibility of my ultimatum to Hanoi." His own cabinet was deeply split, with Laird and Rogers wanting to accelerate US withdrawal from South Vietnam and only Agnew, Kissinger, and Attorney General John Mitchell supporting escalation.

The public was more restive than ever. Five hundred thousand protesters were descending on Washington for a second Moratorium in mid-November—a three-day March Against Death. It would snake from Arlington National Cemetery past the White House to Capitol Hill and would be the biggest demonstration in the capital since the civil rights March on Washington in 1963. Demonstrators formed up by their state of birth or residence and paraded past the White House carrying signs with the names of men from their states killed in the war. Others carried signs with the names of Vietnamese villages wiped off the map by American bombing.

The optics could not have been worse for Nixon as he weighed escalation. Secretary of Defense Laird quietly informed Abrams that Nixon's original plan for Vietnamization—to prepare the ARVN and ruff-puffs to defeat the VC, with US support forces lingering to fight the NVA—had been amended. Now *all* US forces would be out by mid-1973, if not sooner. The South Vietnamese would have to fight entirely alone. Operation Duck Hook was quietly shelved, Kissinger's threat to Hanoi of "measures of the greatest consequence" revealed to be another empty threat. Nixon's "secret plan" to end the war had relied on the president's willingness, as Kissinger put it, "to find Hanoi's breaking point." But both Nixon and Kissinger shrank from

doing just that. The grunts would have none of it, and the domestic and international fallout would be too great.[44]

On November 13, 1969, investigative reporter Seymour Hersh broke the most scandalous story of the war, not in the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*, but below the fold on the front page of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*: "Lieutenant Accused of Murdering 109 Civilians." The My Lai massacre, which the Army had covered up in March 1968, now inconveniently burst into the open.

Hersh's scoop coincided with the massive Moratorium march in Washington, DC, as well as one in San Francisco, where 250,000 protesters appeared. Nixon again vowed that he would not be "affected" by the protests, even when groups that had never before joined the protesters turned out to demand an end to the war. The Moratorium marked a new peak in domestic opposition to the war. Demonstrations spread beyond the major cities. "Thirty people meeting in a church basement in Peoria to protest the war for the first time may be infinitely more important than 30,000 people converging on Washington," one organizer noted. Nixon felt pushed by this intensifying pressure to accelerate the troop withdrawals. He promised to withdraw another 50,000 troops by April 15, 1970. He planned to have nothing but a "residual force" or no troops at all in South Vietnam by the time he ran for reelection in 1972.[45]

Hersh's My Lai story, picked up by every news outlet in the country, was just the sort of news Nixon did not want as he tried to wind down the war and dampen protest. On December 5, 1969, *Life* magazine published gory photos of the massacre—hundreds of murdered men, women, and children piled in the ditches and fields of My Lai. The Army and the State Department were instructed to "relativize" the scandal by providing data on "offsetting" VC terror, as if My Lai could be excused because the VC killed civilians too. Westmoreland ordered the Army's chief of military history to write "a brief history of war crimes" that would place the massacre in what Westy hoped would be an exonerating context. Westmoreland then commissioned a white paper on the massacre for public release on December 7, 1969. As he had done in Vietnam, he put a thumb on the scale: "Relate the attacks on discipline in American society over the past several years to the impact on discipline in the Army."[46]

Ho Chi Minh missed this latest American donnybrook. He had died from a heart condition in September 1969 at the age of seventy-nine. Le Duan now consolidated his power. He published Ho's last will and testament, which insisted that "whatever happens, we must keep firm our resolve to fight the U.S. aggressors till total victory." Le Duan icily reminded his colleagues that "the party is an army which in combat must act as one man." Politburo consensus, maintained by Le Duan's grip on the secret police, would hold Moscow and Beijing onside and "keep options open." No cracks would be allowed to appear in the façade. Le Duan launched a new round of preemptive purges against "wreckers, deviationists, and saboteurs," labels affixed to anyone willing to end the awful war now.[47]

Few of the battered North Vietnamese people were prepared to "wreck" or "deviate" anyway. Conditioned by an intrusive police state to take a "passive attitude to the war," they may have privately opposed the conflict and its colossal waste of lives and resources, but they did not dare raise their voices against it for a simple reason adduced by the British embassy: "There is no way for popular discontent to make itself felt." The politburo wielded all power in North Vietnam, and whatever popular discontent existed was, an analyst in Hanoi observed, "allied to an absolute political inertia."[48]

By late 1969, there were a quarter of a million communist troops in South Vietnam and about 84,000 VCI cadres. They were operating from eight divisional headquarters, with 57 regiments, 271 combat battalions, and 58 combat support battalions. The days of fighting with cast-off World War II weapons were over. These communist units all had AK-47 assault rifles, light and heavy machine guns, B-40 and B-41 RPGs, mortars, and 60 mm and 120 mm recoilless rifles, as well as the latest Soviet and Chinese tactical radios. Their ability to kill Americans and "disintegrate" the ARVN was better than ever. For the first time in the war, NVA regulars appeared in the Mekong Delta to replace all of the VC killed in the reckless offensives of 1968–1969. With the US 9th Infantry Division pulling out—one of the first American troop withdrawals—two NVA regiments crossed from Cambodia into the flat ricelands and swamp areas of the Delta. Everything gained by Operation Speedy Express would shortly be taken back.[49]

On his 1969 Christmas Tour of Vietnam, Bob Hope dropped in on the 1st Infantry Division at their base camp at Lai Khe, thirty-seven miles

northwest of Saigon. Despite regular allied sweeps, the enemy was as entrenched here as ever. Lai Khe was known as "Rocket City" for the frequency of mortar and rocket attacks. Bob Hope joked to 10,000 personnel of the Big Red One and other units that the enemy was so close that "we had to give the Viet Cong half the tickets." In the first years of the war, Hope had been warmly received by the troops. This time was different. When he told the troops that Nixon had "a plan to end the war," he was showered with boos. When TV cameras panned across the crowd, viewers could see the troops standing, hissing, throwing trash at the stage, giving Hope the finger, or flexing Black Power salutes. Dozens of MPs had to form a perimeter around the stage while Hope was hurriedly evacuated. Ron Kovic, who served two tours before being paralyzed in combat, attended the show and summed up the feelings of the troops: "People didn't laugh at his jokes. The war wasn't funny anymore, and a hundred Bob Hopes wouldn't have made any difference."[50]

Chapter 21

"CAMBODIA IS A MAN'S JOB"

In 1970, there was lull in the big-unit war. Nixon's troop drawdowns continued, with the ARVN 1st Division replacing the Marines along the DMZ, and the ARVN 2nd Division taking over much of the Americal Division's Delaware-sized AO south of it. This was the "Vietnamization" of the war promised by Nixon in 1968. The ARVN greeted it everywhere with panic. In III Corps, when General Nguyen Van Hieu's ARVN 5th Division was ordered to move into the departing US 1st Division's AO along Route 13, linking Saigon with the Cambodian border, General Hieu attempted to resign his command. He explained that without American support his division would be unable even to *move*, let alone fight the VC.

Fortunately for the ARVN, the South Vietnamese Joint General Staff and MACV agreed that the enemy had also been lulled into inactivity. They predicted that the communists, gutted by their casualties over the past two years, would wait until at least 1972 to rebuild their combat units before hazarding another major offensive. By then, US personnel would be down to 250,000 or fewer, and NVA reinforcements would be trained and combat-ready.[1]

Hanoi had correctly judged that Nixon's political need to withdraw American troops "was the greatest weak point" of the free-world position.

The more troops came out, the weaker the Thieu regime would be. For now, the Americans continued to seize enemy logistics caches—some of the biggest seizures of the war. These operations, conceived as a last service to President Thieu, continued to kill and wound large numbers of Americans, who ran over mines and tripped booby traps of increasing force and sophistication. Medical officers reported a five-fold increase in multiple amputees among US combat troops in 1970.[2]

Fighting continued sporadically through the rural areas, where the NVA and VC were determined to defeat Saigon's ruff-puff and self-defense forces, stymie pacification, replace VC infrastructure lost to the Phoenix Program, and grab back as much of the peasant population as they could as prelude to yet another general offensive and uprising. These fights were brutal, usually involving ruff-puff units overrun or ambushed, and occasionally reinforced by ARVN troops and American air and artillery. Kill ratios that had always favored the ARVN—when the Americans were fully engaged—were now neutral or negative, the ARVN and the territorial forces losing as many or more troops as the communists. As yet, there was no drawdown in American bombing. The B-52 sortie rate inside South Vietnam continued at 1,800 every month, raining bombs on any area suspected of harboring communist troops and supplies.[3]

Like everything else, CORDS was finally Vietnamized in 1970. The handover went so badly that American personnel in CORDS soared that year, instead of declining. The official explanation for this was that all of those extra Americans were needed to "stimulate the GVN to do more." Bill Colby, who had replaced Bob Komer as director of CORDS, made a tour of the four corps areas to assess the effectiveness of these American stimulants and was disappointed everywhere he went. In I Corps, the Army officers he met could not agree on whether they were succeeding or failing. They claimed to have eliminated 400 VCI in 1969, but then sheepishly admitted that the VC had replaced those 400 cadres with 1,500 new ones. And so it went in every corps area. "It will be many years," Colby dejectedly concluded, "before the VCI will feel the effect of the Phoenix Program."[4]

As for "population security," the other great strut of Abrams' "better war," it too seemed to be failing. Creighton Abrams had briefed his commanders in April 1970 on "the changing nature of the war" and made clear that everything now hinged not on "military operations" but on the "political contest" between the Thieu government and the communists. And yet in all four corps areas Bill Colby observed a total lack of ambition in that vital contest. He was told that "consolidation," not expansion, was the goal for 1970, and that government-controlled areas would only remain so if growing numbers of ruff-puff, National Police, and self-defense force units were funded, armed, and trained by the United States and then deployed around the edges of secure "population envelopes." Colby interjected that at this stage of the war, such ever-increasing American allocations for the territorial forces could not be relied on. "The Vietnamese," he declared, "must learn to cooperate with each other and become self-sufficient."[5]

That wasn't happening. Meetings between the Americans and the ARVN about the militia forces broke down in mutual recriminations, the ARVN bemoaning the "lack of leadership and logistics" in ruff-puff and PSDF units and demanding that Nixon slow down his troop withdrawals to buy *more* time to train and field the South Vietnamese forces. *Esquire* reporter Michael Herr judged Abrams' pacification program no better than Westmoreland's: "psychotic vaudeville, a swollen, computerized tit being forced upon an already violated population, a costly, valueless program that worked only in press conferences."[6]

This was true, and it got to the heart of the eternal problem in Vietnam: How do you know if you're winning? Statistics such as body count had been devalued but certainly not abandoned. New metrics, such as population security measured by mathematical scoring systems, were no more helpful than the old ones, replacing one misleading routine with another. Bob Komer had summed them up this way: "They run the whole gamut from overconfidence to despair." Abrams was blunter: "Yeah, and that comes from another sickness, and that is the worship of *charts*. It finally gets to the point where that's really the whole war—fucking *charts*. Somehow the chart itself becomes the whole damn war, instead of the *people*, and the *real* things."[7]

Nixon had thwarted the peace process in 1968 to get himself elected. He had justified what he did by assuring himself that he, better than LBJ, could coerce Hanoi into ending the war on terms favorable to the United States. In 1969, however, the thirty-seventh president had failed even to *start* the peace negotiations that he had promised voters. The envoys who had finally taken their seats in January 1969 had made no progress twelve months later,

prompting the chief American negotiators, Henry Cabot Lodge Jr. and Lawrence Walsh, to resign in December. The obduracy of the North Vietnamese in Paris—clearly playing for time, for the day when *all* US forces would leave Vietnam—had begun to make Nixon look gullible.

The backlash after Hamburger Hill reminded Nixon that he had little leverage. Even minor casualties upset Congress and the public. By year-end 1969, over 40,000 Americans had been killed in action in Vietnam, with more than 9,000 of them in Nixon's first year in office. With over 300,000 killed and wounded in the war, the United States had now suffered as many casualties in Vietnam as it had lost in the trenches of World War I.

Nixon boasted that he had increased the proportion of South Vietnamese territory under government control from 79 to 90 percent in 1969, a typical piece of Vietnam legerdemain that, even if true, was almost certainly untenable against a future communist onslaught. American escalation—Nixon's trump card—was off the table, and the enemy knew it, for Nixon, who had vowed to batter the communists until they agreed to peace terms that favored Saigon and Washington, kept *subtracting* troops from the force he had in Vietnam to appease critics and reduce the cost of the war.[8]

On December 15, 1969, Nixon had announced another major troop withdrawal: 50,000 more men would come out by April 1970, reducing the troops in-country to 434,000. A year earlier he had inherited an army of 543,000. That had been insufficient to coerce Hanoi. Why would a smaller force prove any more coercive? In 1970, Nixon began reassessing his war strategy. He had taken over every element of Johnson's war in Vietnam, including the promise to remove US forces as well as the "bombing halt," which had deprived the president of most of the leverage he had with Hanoi—his ability to bomb North Vietnamese territory.[9]

Nixon's assumption of LBJ's war had included another self-denying ordinance—Johnson's refusal to attack the communist sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia. They remained bastions of power and recuperation just beyond the reach of free-world forces. In 1970, Nixon, who needed to find a way out of the unpopular war before the elections in 1972, struggled to claw back some leverage, to find ways to hurt the North Vietnamese and make them negotiate in earnest. In February 1970, Le Duan reiterated that the war could go on forever as far as Hanoi was concerned. Protracted war, he said, was the Viet Cong's "strategic principle." The long war, as hard as it was, was "modifying the balance of forces in our favor." "The longer the war lasts," Le Duan concluded, "the weaker the enemy becomes."[10]

To prod negotiations along, Nixon sidestepped the formal peace process and authorized Kissinger to open secret negotiations with Le Duc Tho on the sidelines of the Paris peace talks on February 21, 1970. Unfortunately, Le Duc Tho stipulated the same terms that Hanoi's official delegation was demanding: that the United States withdraw all troops from Vietnam and agree to place the VC's PRP inside a South Vietnamese coalition government shorn of Thieu and Ky.

To Nixon's chagrin, the North Vietnamese government betrayed no sign of war weariness or demoralization. All members of the politburo, tamed and terrified by Le Duan's security apparatus, now agreed that the war must be won without political concessions to the Americans or Saigon. Hopes that a battered North Vietnamese population would pressure the politburo to compromise were also disappointed. Fifteen years of war had made Hanoi's internal security machine stronger, not weaker. The communist party wielded power unchallenged. Poorly fed and housed workers who wanted more were advised to "overcome capitalist thinking" and submit to their "collective masters." In sum, the British embassy in Hanoi concluded, the energies and capacity for resistance of most North Vietnamese were spent entirely "in staying alive and beating the system while appearing to acquiesce in it."[11]

This being the situation, Nixon and Kissinger looked desperately for ways to gain *some* leverage in negotiations. They decided that they would hit the NVA sanctuaries with air and ground forces. Only in this way, they reasoned, could they persuade Hanoi that America would go the extra mile in securing what Nixon called a "just peace, with honor."

Cambodia beckoned again. Communist fighters in I Corps and II Corps were supplied by the Ho Chi Minh Trail through Laos. Abrams' failure to take and hold the A Shau Valley in 1968–1969 meant that Laos was essentially unassailable. One hundred thousand NVA and Pathet Lao troops controlled northern Laos and the Mekong Valley. American bombing in Laos never interrupted the flow of communist supplies.

To Nixon, Kissinger, and Abrams, Cambodia seemed more promising. The VC and NVA units in III and IV Corps were heavily supplied by the Sihanouk Trail, which wended up from the port of Sihanoukville on the

Gulf of Thailand. Many of the Soviet and Chinese rockets, mortars, and bullets fired into US forces came through Cambodia. Ironically, they reached their end users in South Vietnam via the Friendship Highway, which the United States had built in the 1950s at a cost of $34 million to connect Sihanoukville, Phnom Penh, and the eastern border areas.[12]

The growing army of communists in IV Corps was entirely supplied through Cambodia. The Army had intensified its hunt for enemy supply caches inside South Vietnam in early 1970 and made record seizures. "We're as busy as a one-legged man at an ass-kicking contest," one officer reported. In February alone, they had captured 500 tons of matériel: small arms ammo, machine guns, rockets, mortars, recoilless rifles, RPGs, flame-throwers, blocks of explosive, detonator cords, mines, and tactical radios. The biggest caches were in III Corps, and all of their contents had been carried into South Vietnam from Cambodia for use in future offensives. Captured enemy troops spoke of NVA plans to strike from Cambodia to seize the ARVN IV Corps headquarters, base camp, and air base at Can Tho—to rip the Mekong Delta from the hands of the demoralized ARVN, which was being steadily reduced by booby traps and mines brought from Cambodia.[13]

Kissinger's military aide, forty-six-year-old General Alexander Haig, had risen from battalion to brigade command in Vietnam four years earlier. Haig now argued that the internal security situation in South Vietnam was all but irrelevant if the main threat resided in the sanctuaries of Laos and Cambodia, where the NVA was free to build up overwhelming force. Kissinger made the same point, and another: so long as the NVA enjoyed strategic depth and impunity in Cambodia and Laos, the United States would never be able to Vietnamize the war. The most ardent advocate of escalation was the CINCPAC—Admiral John McCain Jr., commander in chief of US forces in the Pacific. The fifty-nine-year-old McCain, whose son had been shot down over Hanoi in 1967, was notorious for his rambling briefings and scare-mongering. In the Pentagon, they called him the "Big Red Arrow Man" for the way he enlivened his briefings with maps of East Asia depicting lurid red arrows sprouting from China to threaten every American interest in the Indo-Pacific.

Admiral McCain now took up the cause of Cambodia. It *had* to be invaded and rid of NVA base camps if Vietnamization was to succeed.

When General Lon Nol launched a coup against Prince Sihanouk in March 1970, Nixon decided to take the plunge into Cambodia.[14]

A whole animal-crackers nomenclature had emerged at MACV to describe the kinks and bulges in the frontier separating South Vietnam and Cambodia. The Americans had given them names such as Crow's Nest, Parrot's Beak, Elephant's Foot, Angel's Wing, Dog's Head, and Fishhook. They contained fourteen known communist sanctuaries and base areas, threatening the two-thirds of the South Vietnamese population who lived in the III and IV Corps areas. Three entire NVA divisions were known to be sheltering along the border in this zone, along with the VC 9th and 5th Divisions. Pham Hung's COSVN was also there. The threat these sanctuaries presented was magnified by their nearness to Saigon. The Fishhook, believed to be the home of COSVN, lay forty-eight miles north of Saigon. The Parrot's Beak was just twenty-four miles west of Saigon.[15]

Nixon had continued the "secret bombing" of the Cambodian sanctuaries begun in March 1969 into 1970. Three thousand sorties had been flown and 110,000 tons of bombs had been dropped on eastern Cambodia. In Washington, the administration falsified or destroyed every record of this illegal bombing of a neutral nation.

With Sihanouk in exile, Lon Nol and Siri Matak saw American bombing as the easiest way to compel North Vietnamese and VC units to abandon the Cambodian sanctuaries. If the Cambodians attacked the sanctuaries, they would incur NVA retaliation, which, given the small size and pathetic capabilities of the Cambodian military, had to be avoided at all costs.[16]

Having broken diplomatic relations with Cambodia in 1965 and only recently resumed them, the United States had scant information on Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge. In 1970, the CIA estimated that it numbered 5,000 or 6,000. In fact, it was over 100,000 strong. The number of NVA and VC troops in Cambodia was estimated to be 60,000. For Sihanouk, continued neutrality had been the only viable option. Hanoi kept the Khmer Rouge on a leash only so long as Phnom Penh continued the "extreme neutrality" that favored the NVA without a communist takeover of Cambodia.[17]

Nixon was bolder but shouldn't have been. The entire futility of what he was about to do, which came to be called the "Cambodian Incursion," was summed up by two of his own presidential acts in April 1970—the first on April 20, the second ten days later. On April 20, Nixon announced that

he would withdraw 150,000 additional American troops from Vietnam over the next twelve months. By 1971, in other words, there would be half as many US troops in South Vietnam as had been there when Nixon took office. Militarily, this meant that the Americans would lack the manpower for major, sustained offensive operations *anywhere*, least of all Cambodia and Laos. The announcement was met with rapture on campuses but also in the Senate, where LBJ's old budget director went before Fulbright's Foreign Relations Committee and explained that troop withdrawals were the fastest way to shave about $5 billion from the $18.5 billion annual cost of the war.[18]

But they had to be enacted quickly, and without any "step-up in U.S. combat operations." The American sword, in other words, was disintegrating in its scabbard. On April 30, Nixon resolved to wield it before it was gone. He went on television to announce "U.S. operations against the communist sanctuaries in Cambodia." America, he scolded, must not "act like a pitiful helpless giant when the chips are down." This belligerent announcement was met with outrage. An American public and Congress that had been told the war was ending were confronted instead with its expansion.[19]

American voters didn't need to be reminded of the bargain Nixon had made with them in 1968. He would withdraw troops and end the war. If the South Vietnamese couldn't defend themselves, they would have to negotiate with the communists. With his decision to invade Cambodia, Nixon effectively suspended Vietnamization and sent American troops once again to fight for the Thieu-Ky regime.[20]

Nixon was hopeful, for Phnom Penh had been rocked by anti-Vietnamese riots, prompting Lon Nol to close the port of Sihanoukville, order all NVA and VC troops out of Cambodia within seventy-two hours, remove Sihanouk as head of state, and put himself in charge of a new Khmer Republic only too eager to tap into the same fountain of dollars that was sustaining Thieu. The coup, the CIA declared, "represents a reversal of the slow nibbling-away" at Cambodian sovereignty by Hanoi.[21]

But Nixon was desperate too. He may have said in that April 30 television address that he'd rather be a one-term president "than a two-term president at the cost of seeing America become a second-rate power," but he certainly didn't mean it. The Cambodian Incursion threatened his reelection, and he knew it.

Fundraising for Ed Muskie, George McGovern, and the thirteen other Democrats vying for the right to run against Nixon in 1972 took off after the president's speech announcing the invasion of Cambodia. Lon Nol was wobbly, his small army poorly armed and motivated. New formations equipped and trained by the Americans were not sent to fight the communists. They were kept in Phnom Penh as a palace guard. In February, America's "secret war" in Laos—begun by Kennedy and expanded to no good effect by LBJ and Nixon—had been exposed in the press and had resulted in an eleven-point drop in Nixon's poll numbers. Senate majority leader Mike Mansfield accused Nixon of secretly "re-involving" America in a war in Laos that had attained "disturbing proportions."[22]

That was putting it mildly. Laos, it now appeared, was the most heavily bombed country in the history of the world. Over 2 million tons of bombs had been dropped there by nearly 600,000 American sorties, killing somewhere between 30,000 and 100,000 Laotians and North Vietnamese. By this date, these were just more numbers to throw on the heap of grim statistics produced by the war.

All of that destruction checked but never stopped the flow of North Vietnamese troops and supplies down the trail—about 20,000 tons of matériel every month and an NVA troop presence in Laos that hovered around 100,000. What caused the drop in Nixon's poll numbers was not the pummeling of Laos or the meager effect of the bombing but the administration's admission that twenty-seven Americans had died there in the "secret war." A miscarriage in Cambodia could do far worse, and a miscarriage seemed inevitable.[23]

Even as Nixon planned the Cambodian Incursion, it was obvious that the operation would fail, and Nixon knew it. Secretary of Defense Laird and Secretary of State Rogers warned that any move into Cambodia would weaken Vietnamization by spreading scarce resources even thinner than they already were. CIA analysts predicted that an American strike into Cambodia would merely inconvenience the communists, not derail them.

MACV and the CIA had already reported the startling collapse of Lon Nol's army and the abrupt end of all attempts to coordinate joint ARVN and Cambodian operations against the communist sanctuaries in March 1970—at the time of the supposedly revivifying Lon Nol coup. On the Cambodian side, officers who had set up the joint operations were relieved. On

the South Vietnamese side, officers were ordered to tell MACV nothing about arrangements for cooperation, lest the Americans insist on more of it. "Phnom Penh will do *nothing* against the NVA/VC," the CIA confirmed in early April.[24]

The Lon Nol government's bluster was just that: "They fear the growing communist threat and will only seek to *contain* the communist forces in their operating areas near the South Vietnamese borders." There would be no thought of attacking the 50,000 NVA and VC troops in Cambodia. Already additional NVA and VC battalions were moving from the Mekong Delta back into Cambodia to defend the sanctuaries, defeat Lon Nol's army, and seize control of half of Cambodia's seventeen provinces. Cambodian troops were observed defecting to the communists with their weapons. Lon Nol's minister of national defense was spotted berating his own troops in the field for their refusal to fight. "I have no confidence in their fighting abilities," he groused.[25]

Lon Nol, who had already delivered his own vote of no confidence by sending his family into exile in Singapore, now hit the brakes hard. On the South Vietnamese side, President Thieu was even less helpful. The ARVN, Thieu said, would do nothing more than "harass the border areas," to make it harder for the enemy to access his "enormous caches" of weapons and ammo. Thieu gave orders that ARVN units could advance no more than six miles into Cambodia, and only during daylight hours. They were required to return to Vietnamese territory before nightfall. There would be no war of annihilation, merely soft jabs to appease Nixon—jabs easily ducked or defeated by the communists.[26]

The feeble efforts actually undertaken by Lon Nol triggered a predictable backlash from the communist forces, who moved deeper into Cambodia to escape the American bombing, attack Lon Nol's troops, and punish the new regime, which had begun to intern, persecute, and even massacre the 400,000 ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia.

This threw an immediate wrench into Nixon's plan to unite the Cambodian and South Vietnamese military efforts. After watching tens of thousands of plundered Vietnamese flee into South Vietnam and inspecting the sites of massacres in Cambodia, the ARVN pronounced itself unwilling to coordinate with Lon Nol or *any* Cambodian regime. The ARVN paused during their own operations in Cambodia to loot every town or village they encountered, and then invoiced Lon Nol's government $6.5 million for the cost of their intervention.

"The Viet Cong came but left with nothing," a Cambodian officer told Peter Kann of the *Wall Street Journal*. "The South Vietnamese came and took *everything*." South Vietnamese air strikes in Cambodia made no distinction between civilian and military targets. To Kann, this splintered a key plank of the Nixon Doctrine—that anticommunist Asian regimes would assist each other and not rely entirely on the United States. "The fact is that most Asians don't much like other Asians," Kann remarked.[27]

Relations continued in the traditional vein, the Vietnamese regarding the Cambodians as weaklings who had tolerated the communist presence on their soil for too long, the Cambodians viewing the Vietnamese as haughty interlopers. Prince Sihanouk, who still enjoyed godlike status with the Cambodian peasantry, established a government-in-exile in Beijing that allied with Hanoi, the VC, the Khmer Rouge, and the Laotian Pathet Lao. The Americans, the prince fretted, "have turned the Vietnam War into an Indochina War." Urban enthusiasm for Lon Nol was offset by the hatred felt by Cambodia's more numerous peasantry, who interpreted Sihanouk's overthrow as sacrilege and rioted against the new regime. None of Nixon's gambits in Cambodia—Lon Nol, the secret bombing, the looming US incursion—would be worth the effort or lives expended if, as seemed likely, Lon Nol's government collapsed and the NVA or Khmer Rouge took over.[28]

If *that* happened, all of Cambodia, not just its eastern borderlands, would become a communist sanctuary. In the context of a popular war for a vital national interest, the incursion would have made perfect sense. In the context of Vietnam, it made no sense at all. America lacked the power to stay in Cambodia and police its vast space. Lon Nol stood no chance against the NVA, VC, and Khmer Rouge. This was already obvious. A month before Nixon invaded Cambodia, Lon Nol's army had been routed by the more professional NVA, who seized most of eastern Cambodia in an operation they named Campaign X. In mid-April 1970, Lon Nol told Nixon that his US-aligned Khmer Republic, only a year old, was about to perish from these communist attacks. Political cartoonists had a field day with this emerging fiasco, one depicting Kissinger gravely informing the president that "all we know about Lon Nol is that his name spelled backwards makes Lon Nol."[29]

People who knew Nixon worried that he was losing his mind. The president felt humiliated that his "secret plan" to end the war was a bust. Two of his picks for the Supreme Court had been rejected by the Senate. He was watching the film *Patton* over and over in this period, conflating himself with George C. Scott's muscular portrayal of Patton and steeling himself to do something brash and decisive, like the old tank general. "The liberals are waiting to see Nixon let Cambodia go down the drain just the way Eisenhower let Cuba go down the drain," he told Kissinger. "I'll show them who's tough." Withdrawing from Vietnam is "a boy's job," he sputtered to Bob Haldeman. "Cambodia is a man's job. It really needs to work." Spiro Agnew, Nixon's most hawkish enabler, exhorted the president to stop "pussyfooting" and go into Cambodia hard.[30]

The first American thrusts into Cambodia began on April 29, 1970, and Nixon went on television to address the American people the next day. Ten days earlier he had promised troop reductions. Now he was announcing the biggest battle of the war since 1967's Operation Junction City. This one, Operation Final Victory, sent 31,000 American troops into Cambodia, where 2,000 of them would be killed or wounded. Five years earlier, LBJ had said that "the lives of our sons are too great a price for national vanity." But not for Nixon. "This is not an invasion of Cambodia," the president assured the American people. "We take this action not for the purpose of expanding the war into Cambodia but for the purpose of ending the war in Vietnam and winning the just peace we all desire." In meetings with his inner circle, Nixon tried to sound Pattonesque: "Don't worry about divisiveness. Having drawn the sword, don't take it out. Stick it in hard. Hit 'em in the gut. No defensiveness."[31]

Invading Cambodia, Nixon told Americans, would buy more precious months to expand and train the ARVN. The president had just announced those four additional US troop withdrawals—totaling 150,000—to be brought home by April 1971, by which time only 240,000 US troops would remain. Nixon had ruled out a "precipitous" retreat from South Vietnam, vowing that he would tailor every withdrawal to the speed of ARVN improvement, progress in the Paris talks, and a verifiable decline in enemy activity, but in fact he was pulling out as precipitously as he could without verifying *any* of these things, so keen was he to secure his political flank before the 1972 elections. Privately, he called the troop withdrawal announcements "bombshells" that he could drop on the Democrats and the antiwar protesters. Militarily, there was nothing strategic about them.[32]

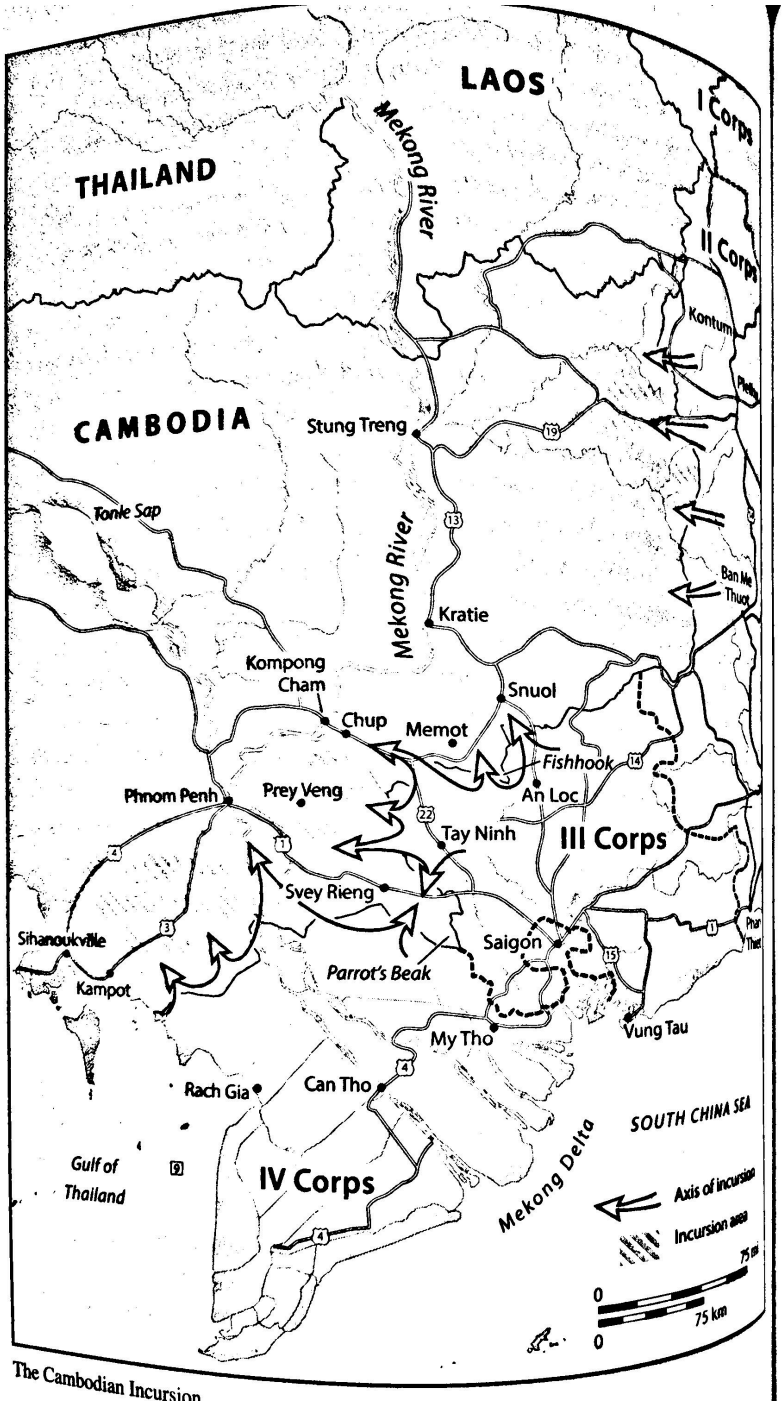
Abe Abrams warned Nixon that unless the NVA forces in Cambodia were significantly weakened, they would overrun South Vietnam before the American withdrawal was complete, which was to say *before* the 1972 elections. Army chief of staff Westmoreland gave more ammunition to those inclined to believe that, like the Bourbons, he had learned and forgotten nothing. Invading Cambodia, Westy wrote Abrams, "may be conducive to relaxation of some of the constraints under which we have been operating." He pressed Abrams to "take advantage of the opportunity."

But Abrams, unlike Westy, could face facts. With his army being cut in half over the next twelve months, small gains were all that could be expected. Abrams aimed at COSVN, which had eluded the B-52 raids. Nixon yearned for COSVN. He called it "the key control center" and expected to capture a "Bamboo Pentagon" staffed by 5,000 officers and technicians, with secret maps, code books, and hotlines to Hanoi, Beijing, and Moscow. Unfortunately, whatever facilities COSVN had, Pham Hung had moved them a month earlier in anticipation of the incursion, which, as usual, had been betrayed by high-placed communist spies in Saigon.[33]

COSVN did not have to go far to escape Nixon's incursion. MACV's rules of engagement allowed US forces to advance no more than eighteen miles into Cambodia, ARVN troops no more than thirty-one miles. In that narrow band of Cambodian territory along the border they found NVA training camps, hospital complexes, and headquarters—all mostly abandoned. They seized legendary enemy base areas with names like Shakey's Hill, Rock Island East, and The City. They scooped up 7,000 tons of rice, 1,700 tons of munitions, 20,000 weapons, 55 tons of medical supplies, 41 tons of explosives, and 3.5 million pages of documents. All that remained of COSVN, a reporter observed, "was a scattering of a few empty huts."[34]

Fifteen thousand troops of the Cav and the US 11th Armored Cavalry Regiment invaded the Fishhook and found it empty. There were caches but few enemy troops. Troopers of the Cav armored regiment took advantage of the respite to loot the Cambodian town of Snuol. The enemy and COSVN had fled westward, under orders "to conserve forces as much as we can."[35]

Eight thousand ARVN and 1,000 grunts of the US 25th Infantry Division plunged into the Parrot's Beak, which bulged to within twenty-four



The Cambodian Incursion

miles of Saigon. In this early test of "Vietnamization," they fought a two-day battle against a communist rearguard that then fled deeper into Cambodia. Troops of the 101st Airborne and the 4th ID air-assaulted from Pleiku into the sanctuaries and found enemy base camps, bunkers, tunnels, and mortar positions, but only a smattering of communist troops. Tipped off about the operation, the NVA had retreated west across the Mekong River, which flowed parallel to the sanctuaries, just behind them. With the Americans leaving the war, they reasoned, why bother fighting them?[36]

In all, large pieces of four American divisions and three ARVN infantry-armor task forces struck into Cambodia. Denied the troops and authority to pursue the retreating enemy, they did little more than seize food and weapons caches—so much food that a company commander in the Cav recalled that during the operation starving communist troops trailed his platoons at a discreet distance "so they could eat our garbage, the stuff we'd throw away." The grunts found chicken and pig farms, mess halls, hospitals, firing ranges, bunkers, trucks, telephone switchboards, ammo, and food, but hardly any troops. They captured enough weapons to equip a 12,000-man enemy division and enough ammo to supply 126 communist battalions for four months of combat.

Secretary of Defense Laird's Systems Analysis Office in the Pentagon ran the numbers and estimated that the incursion had seized 25 percent of the NVA's supplies. But those items would be replaced, most within seventy-five days. British Conservative MP Enoch Powell, a fierce anticommunist, nevertheless ridiculed Nixon's incursion. "It is the futility of American policy that constitutes its culpability," Powell declaimed. "When the operation is over, the underlying facts of the situation will reassert themselves like the tide washing out footmarks in the sand."[37]

"Goddamn, goddamn," Abrams agreed. "We need another division, we need to go in deep. We need to go west from where we are, we need to go north and east from where we are. And we need to do it *now*." Abrams wasn't getting any of that, and he knew it. Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird had reluctantly consented to the incursion only because he took for granted that the communist troops would temporarily evacuate the sanctuaries—minimizing the chances of combat and casualties.[38]

Nixon flailed impotently. "Let's go blow the hell out of them," he shouted at Laird, Kissinger, and the chiefs in a Pentagon conclave. He then took the